

Smallness, Autonomy, and Choice: Scaling Up

by Deborah Meier

For those of us who would like to see Ron Wolk’s vision of schools realized, the challenge of scaling up is the most daunting one we face. Skeptics like to say, “Oh well, that ‘X’ and ‘Y’ did something really special is irrelevant; they’re exceptions.” But my experience suggests that today’s exceptions can become tomorrow’s norms.

If that is to happen, we need to provide a way for exceptions to be nourished and made systemic. We need a new kind of system whose central task is to maintain the protected space necessary for nurturing what I call “exceptionalism”: a lean, mean system, with a limited but critical accountability function that protects the public interest; a system that respects the fact that schools must be responsive, but to their own constituents—the members of their community, not the system itself.

How to accomplish that goal is the challenge. My experiences lead me to conclude the challenge is very much doable.

Winning Battles at Every Level

The school level: Thirty years of successful experiments have shown that we can provide all children with public schools that produce improved results—both academically and socially—for the best and wealthiest children as well as the failing.

There is consensus about what the major features of good schools are:

1. The schools that work best are small. Within them, people are not anonymous and interchangeable.
2. Schools that work best think of themselves as self-governing. They accept being held accountable for their work because they are in charge of making major workplace decisions.
3. Schools that work best are places of choice. They feel special to those who belong to them.

These three qualities—smallness, autonomy, and choice—are common to almost all successful school reform efforts. When you think about it, that only makes sense: few parents, when seeking a good workplace either for themselves or for their children, wouldn't prefer one that had all three qualities. Wealthy people, like poor ones, may make different choices when seeking schools for their kids, but they almost always choose schools that have those three characteristics.

The district level: We have even figured out how to take that lesson to the “next level.” The successful ventures of Anthony Alvarado in East Harlem and Stephen Phillips in the New York City alternative high school division exemplify what is possible for all children on a grand scale if we extrapolate using the smallness-autonomy-choice formula. Alvarado spent ten years slowly creating a districtwide system of choice, comprising some 18,000 children in fifty-two school buildings that could survive his departure, and he used the lessons he learned there to redesign another district in the same city. Stephen Phillips spent more than twenty years as the head of perhaps the largest district of small, self-governing schools of choice in the world: New York City's alternative high school division, which serves many of the city's toughest students but nonetheless is home to dozens of innovative and acclaimed high schools.

The East Harlem and the New York City alternative high school division's efforts blossomed because of the support systems designed by Alvarado and Phillips. The systems matched the task itself—flexible, responsive, always (well, almost always) alert to ways to support the particular needs of each school.

Large, failing schools: In the context of frustration over the absence of a citywide impact by our otherwise highly acclaimed high school work, six New York City alternative high school principals accepted the challenge to make the formula applicable to the city's larger reform agenda. The six schools, all affiliated with Ted Sizer's national Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), with support from several major foundations, designed a plan and made an offer. The Coalition Campus School Project (CCSP), as the six CES schools called themselves, suggested that if big, impersonal, failing high schools could be broken up into smaller schools, maybe they would work in a fashion similar to the existing small high schools.

The New York Center of the Coalition of Essential Schools made the following proposal: Gradually close one large, unquestionably failing high school in each of the three worst-performing boroughs, then gradually repopulate each school with the same student population, but now as educational complexes housing five or six small CES-style schools with formal mentoring ties to the original six CES schools.

Our proposal was accepted by the mayor, the state commissioner, the city chancellor, the school board, and the United Federation of Teachers. Despite skeptical colleagues in district and central offices, sympathizers and converts emerged once it became clear that the commitment of all parties was firm.

During the next five years—from 1993 to 1998—the Manhattan site (the old Julia Richman High School) became a nationally recognized example of reusing a large, old-fashioned high school building to serve the same basic student population. The old Richman High houses four independent high schools (including one exclusively for new immigrants), as well as an infant center, a K–8 elementary and middle school, and a school for severely disabled youngsters. One of the new schools was conceived by the former Richman faculty, and the other three were incubated in off-site spaces.

Studies by Columbia University's National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST), under Linda Darling-Hammond, have validated the project's goals: increased rates of graduation, daily attendance, and post-high school education, together with lower dropout rates. Above and beyond those statistics were two important qualitative changes: greater parental participation (for instance, virtually all the parents in the new Bronx schools attended open-house night), and safety (the school soon eliminated its metal detectors). A study by New York University demonstrated that the small schools cost only slightly more per student to operate than their larger predecessors had. On a per-graduate basis, they were less expensive.

Whole-city size: In fall 1994, the second year of the CCSP project, Walter Annenberg offered Ted Sizer and the CES up to \$50 million to create a plan that would systemically impact urban education: that is, a way not only to secure the continued existence of CCSP-type schools, but to scale them up to become the New York City schools' operational model.

To explore the idea, the Coalition of Essential Schools and three other experienced nonprofit school-reform organizations joined forces in New York City. The four organizations differed on tactics, pedagogy, and ideology, but they agreed on the three essentials: smallness, autonomy, and choice. The challenge was to use our school-based experience to design a complete system compatible with those essentials.

To house our work we established a parallel administrative structure, with no particular geographic boundaries, "The Learning Zone," designed for more than 100 small schools citywide. Ultimately serving "only" 50,000 students (of 1.2 million in the overall system), the new structure was subdivided into networks of four to seven schools and overseen by a lean central office, ultimately accountable to the city's board of education.

Although the proposed Learning Zone would encompass only about 5 percent of New York City's vast student population, its size and scope were right in the middle of the range of U.S. urban school districts—about the size of those in Boston, Oakland, and Washington, D.C. What was learned in the Learning Zone might be translated elsewhere, and, of course, spread to the rest of New York City. Once again, we had the support of every critical constituency.

We knew that it was the particulars of each of our schools that lay at the heart of our successes: their freedom of action, which inspired the passions of those involved and drew out the best in every participant. We concluded that the way to maintain those particulars was to balance new and greater freedoms with new and more comprehensive methods of accountability. In return for more freedom in using their per capita resources, hiring personnel, and organizing individual schools in their particular ways, schools agreed to accept greater responsibility for demonstrating fiscal and educational accountability.

The “new and greater freedoms” part of the balance was, of course, seemingly easier to address. Our five guiding policies were drawn from shared experience:

1. Keep it simple. (Our central office for the Learning Zone was tiny.)
2. Be patient and learn from experience.
3. Celebrate and honor variety within our midst, including interesting work outside our ranks, and be wary of talk about sacrificing some children's prospects in the present for the greater good of the many in the future.
4. Negotiate a lean master contract among the individual schools, the teachers union, the city, and the state. It would cover only the most basic obligations besides unwaivable local, state, and federal rules pertaining to health, safety, and equity.
5. Withstand the temptation to respond to mistakes by adding a new rule, department, or monitoring device.

The “new and more comprehensive methods of accountability” part of the balance was more challenging: how to support and hold accountable schools that were, by design, unlike. Equity, student outcomes, and fiscal integrity were the bottom lines for which we agreed to be held accountable, and we proposed four specific mechanisms of accountability:

Judging student outcomes. Aside from reporting on a lean list of standard common indicators, all our schools were committed to making their individual standards, as well as the ways in which they measured student work toward meeting the standards, explicit. All supported multiple forms of evidence.

Mutual schoolwide oversight and assessment. All our schools agreed to answer to one another for the quality of their work to make themselves visible to their colleagues and to accept new forms of collegial oversight. We proposed that all schools in the Learning Zone join small learning networks of four to seven sister schools. Each network would organize a system of collective review of each other's work, which in turn we would study for lessons of success.

Formal reviews. We proposed formal review panels—public auditors—composed of both critical friends and representatives of more distanced and skeptical publics to attest to the credibility of the networks, their mutual accountability systems, and the work of their schools. The findings of such review panels were to be publicly available, and their recommendations ultimately the responsibility of the larger, democratically chosen public authorities, for example, the city's chancellor and central board.

Collecting information. We agreed that everyone—teachers, parents, assessors, legislators, and the public—needed a shared body of credible and, where possible, longitudinal information (samples of actual student work and cohort studies, as well as numerical data) on which to build and test their reflections and judgments about the work of the project. Such data would help us and the public judge whether we achieved important student outcomes, met the test of equity, and demonstrated fiscal responsibility.

Why No Victories?

Despite a proven foundation and a comprehensive plan, the Annenberg project did not move forward. What went wrong? Why isn't the Learning Zone now an example for others to follow? The simple fact is that within six months, the leadership of every critical constituency changed hands, and only the union was willing to stick with the agreement. The money kept flowing, but the Learning Zone was dropped, along with all that it proposed. What lessons can we learn?

The need for protected space. To answer that we must go back to the initial statement of need—"[W]e need a new kind of system whose central task is to maintain the protected space necessary for nurturing what I call 'exceptionalism' . . ."—and look at what the earlier success stories had in common. In general it appears that we had created lasting successes only when we had been able to formalize the necessary protected space with contracts, reporting relationships, and administrative procedures (e.g., the successes of Alvarado and Phillips). In most of the other cases where success had been short-lived, we had not been able to formalize the necessary protected space; rather, it had been an artifact of the patronage of specific individuals. That was true for the Learning

Zone. We didn't have the time to institutionalize it before the leadership changes hit our key constituencies; i.e., we lacked time to build sufficient backing beyond our supportive but fickle patrons to make it difficult or impossible for them to renege on their commitments.

In my opinion, there are three reasons why formalizing the necessary protected space proved more difficult than anticipated: two systemic, and one unique to the present political environment.

The challenge of existing culture. The first systemic reason is that the bureaucratic structure of public education is inherently hostile to the variation, messiness, and even chaos of the smallness-autonomy-choice formula. The current bureaucratic ideal is a machine: the bigger, more centralized, and more rule-constrained, the better. One qualified teacher is seen as the same as another; one licensed principal is right for any principal's slot. In the end, the system instinctively fears the exception so strongly that it does not allow schools to stray far from the norm. If the exceptional school does flourish, it is in spite of the system, not because of it.

The challenge of peer jealousy. The second systemic reason is that exciting proposals are often met with hostility by natural allies as well as natural adversaries. "Why you, not us?" was a cry often heard in the initial stages. Precisely because our small "pilot" design excluded so many natural allies, we could not garner the kind of wide support needed.

The challenge of top-down standardization. The Learning Zone was still in its infancy when we encountered the advent of the current top-down standardization drive. The new wisdom was that the linkage of classrooms, schools, and central authorities in America's schools has been too loose, not too tight. A new wave of reformers argued for centrally designed goals and measurable results—test scores above all—plus a host of intervening regulations to serve those ends. Schools faced severe penalties for failure to meet the numeric testing goals. The result has been the granddaddy of all five-year plans, with the stifling effect of a Soviet five-year plan on smallness-autonomy-choice schools.

The trend has been to solve the accountability issue with politically powerful decisionmakers—mayors, governors, or civic elites—who are further from the action, not closer to it; typically, one or another high-stakes standardized test replaces local assessments and professional judgments. The rationale is that centralization is the only way to obtain strong business support, and thus the needed funds, for reform.

The new consensus—that the change agents must come from outside, uncontaminated by intimate knowledge of schools, kids, or families, and muster enough clout to overcome local resistance—has made holding on, not scaling up, the order of the day for small schools.

Problems in Three Cities

New York. The CCSP initiative and the Annenberg Learning Zone directly contradicted the new state and federal top-down initiatives and long-standing systemic conditions as well. Both initiatives were stifled. Despite the resounding success of the Julia Richman High School redesign, we were less successful in carrying out the redesign of James Monroe High School in the Bronx, and we never made it to the third promised site in Brooklyn.

The work on CCSP stalled because the school systems and their powerful business and political allies weren't ready to risk a decidedly unusual idea that was not easy to grasp or summarize quickly. The Annenberg project floundered for many of the same reasons: the city's inability to keep the same chancellor for more than a few years; a change in state educational leadership after the election of a new governor; a shift in the local central school board leadership; and a change in the local union's leadership. At the same time, differences in tactics, pedagogy, and ideology among the four supporting nonprofit school reform organizations came to overshadow their consensus on smallness, autonomy, and choice. Only the union didn't blink.

When the Learning Zone was abandoned, the promise of officially sanctioned fiscal autonomy and freedom from the constraints of rules and regulations was lost. Removing the carrot of additional autonomy undermined development of the new, more comprehensive methods of accountability and the necessary supporting networks. The planned autonomy-for-accountability deal never developed.

During the same period other cities explored, flirted with, and even established similar small-scale efforts with Annenberg support. Most suffered fates similar to that of the New York initiatives.

Chicago. Chicago's small-schools networks, one of the oldest in the nation, had launched several dozen promising new schools as part of its Annenberg grant. Almost simultaneously, however, Chicago's political climate turned 180 degrees. The city that had been a pioneer of school-based decision-making became a model of centralized power almost overnight. Today, with supportive funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Chicago is launching small schools, but in a climate of top-down mandates and fiscal cutbacks. The same has been true in Oakland, San Francisco, and many other cities that explored the small-schools idea in the past two decades.

Boston. Amid a flurry of excitement, charter-style pilot schools were also established by the union and the Boston authorities. However, the next school administration viewed them as a sideline from which to draw good practices, but not systemic ones. Teachers in other schools blamed the pilots for all citywide school financial difficulties, and the union soon

found the pilots a worry rather than an opportunity. Fortunately, because the Boston pilots were written into the contract, they have not only survived but grown in influence over the years, standing as at least a short-term exception to an otherwise discouraging norm.

Formalizing Protected Space

What conditions are needed to formalize and maintain the needed protected space? In a nutshell, freedom from the vagaries of momentary political whims is necessary, and it will require wider and more deep-seated public support.

Precedent. Ample public wisdom supports the importance of formalized protected space. Federal judges receive lifetime appointments so they can make rulings independent of short-term political pressures. I have a contract with my organization for exactly the same reason. So do presidents and congressmen! The term of a senator is three times that of a representative precisely to allow senators a longer-term perspective than a representative's. And we use multiple forms of evidence to decide upon the renewal of my contract or the reelection of elected officials: the will of the people in the latter case, and the carefully crafted assessment of my bosses in the former.

Public trust. Thus, the tools exist to formalize the protected space, but to change the current top-down mindset we must deal with the issue of public trust, both locally and nationally. Until Americans trust schools to do the job well, we won't be permitted to undertake the difficult long-term work of redesigning the system as well as the schools.

At times that aspiration seems utopian even to me. Do we imagine that all our fellow human beings are wise, good, and competent? Can we trust them? Our immediate instinct is to write pages of "what ifs" and "supposing thats" to protect ourselves from the abuses bound to arise as ordinary people struggle to make their ideas work in real-world contexts. However, on the hopeful side, we should keep in mind that most of our citizens do trust the public schools they know best—their own children's schools or those in their own communities. In one national poll after another, parents and non-parents alike generally give high grades to local schools.

Oft-replicated polling data suggest that the pressure to put the clamps on schools is more precisely a belief that "there ought to be a law" for *other people's* schools: some systemic, powerful lever that will get everyone working up to snuff without spending a lot more on anything substantially different. But even there the evidence suggests that twenty years of bashing our public schools and their teachers has done surprisingly little damage. Strong leadership and effective advocacy, not public trust, may be the missing element.

Before making too much of the poll data, we must acknowledge a significant exception: Latinos, and to an even greater extent African Americans, support their local schools far less than other constituencies. The polls reflect frustration and rage that public schools have been part of the problem in failing to narrow the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Many of the most vexing provisions of NCLB respond, or appear to respond, to the frustration of that dream long deferred. The demagoguery embedded in NCLB may be self-evident, but its strong, clear language has not been matched by more sensible proposals.

Placing decision-making close to the decision, as successful school reforms do, can be seen as a cop-out that simply leaves things to the folks in the field. It can seem like a lame excuse for the forceful action that some believe is required to address a long history of unequal treatment. Therefore, if school-reform efforts are to gain the trust of African Americans and Latinos, civil rights advocates must be accorded an important voice in school reform discussions, and our proposals for change must merit their support.

Pursuing Strange Bedfellows

Changing the public mindset to formalize the protected space we need might be achieved by the bold and creative pursuit of several strange bedfellows in public school reform.

Political conservatives. The freedom we want for our smallness-autonomy-choice schools is the very freedom that conservatives want for their own schools and, in theory, for every one else's schools, too. Whether or not the microregulated, centralized NCLB regime proves to be a passing anomaly, liberal school reformers can still hearken to the conservative value of local control and create the momentum to install a totally unregulated voucher system.

Business leaders. Equally strange bedfellows would be America's business leaders. If general perceptions are correct, "business" is one of the strongest proponents of the standards and testing that effectively prohibit the necessary protected space. If that's really true, it may be because "business," focusing too narrowly on a seductive but naive "bottom line," has thereby overlooked the real challenge: to produce success rather than merely measure it.

A narrow fixation on the bottom line can cause as much mischief in a business as fixation on test scores can cause in a school. Enron and WorldCom fudged their earnings; high-profile school districts have fudged test scores and graduation rates. Likewise, the past half-century has seen a shift, however inconsistent, in recognizing the importance of placing more voice and control close to the actual "production" line. Recognizing the similar tensions involved in business and education

might allow us to transcend the simplistic translation of “the bottom line” and learn from rather than replicate each other’s work.

Accountability activists. Even though accountability is the battle cry of the top-down advocates, greater accountability may pave the way to greater autonomy. We know that accountability is least effective in large anonymous schools where no one “owns” the results. We know from the Learning Zone that sophisticated accountability systems can be designed. We know from the Boston pilot schools that external review can be a useful tool, and that holding each school accountable to its own individual school board can be a powerful determinant of success.

It may be that accountability activists can be brought to understand that small, autonomous schools of choice are among the most willing to be held accountable for achievement outcomes, equity, and fiscal integrity. Perhaps the answer will be to emulate the Boston pilots and negotiate autonomy in exchange for agreeing to one school board for each school. Perhaps some day we’ll abandon our reliance on the 15,000 school boards we have nationwide today and get back to the 200,000 or more school boards that existed in my childhood. Whatever the answer may be, success will require bold leadership, patient negotiation, and a more-constructive political environment.

In a less-extreme political environment we may be able to build bridges with political conservatives, business leaders, accountability activists, civil rights advocates, educators, trade unionists, and parents and formalize that all-important protected space: the buffer we need to support creativity, innovation, experimentation, and responsibility for complex outcomes. In the protected space we can use the experiences described here to build what we once seemed close to creating: schools in which adults have the space to make their own decisions about matters of importance while also ensuring accountability to both the immediate constituents and the larger public.

When parochialism is less to be feared, networking easier, and the exchange of information across geographic and class boundaries more extensive and powerful, we may be able to secure the protected space we need to realize Ron Wolk’s vision. Then we can put substance behind what today is but a political slogan: “No Child Left Behind.”

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